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Socio-political fracturing: Inequality, stalled social mobility and electoral outcomes

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Abstract

The past eighteen months have delivered a series of ‘surprising’ electoral outcomes. In the US, the election of Donald Trump confounded expectations. In the UK, the leave result from the EU referendum and the subsequent snap General Election which saw the Conservative Party lose their majority have been heralded as knife-edge moments and a new period in politics. This paper makes an alternative contention. It posits that the electoral outcomes of 2016 and 2017 were not arbitrary or new occurrences, but instead represent the latest expressions of long-standing historical trends towards increased inequality across the West. Recognising that the impacts of economic and political restructuring have been unevenly distributed between different groups and geographical areas, the paper makes the case that these electoral outcomes must be seen in the light of policy moves creating a more polarised social and spatial structure. Using the UK as an illustrative case, the paper explores the developments that have reinforced spatial opportunity structures and the reproduction of disadvantage over time. In doing so, the paper contextualises the revanchism resultant from processes of social residualisation and articulates the need to focus on the long run effects of rising inequality now being seen to shape voters’ choices.

Keywords: Austerity; Brexit; Inequality; Intergenerational Inheritances; Social Mobility; UK.

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1. Introduction

In the United Kingdom, the outcome of the 2016 EU Referendum was greeted, at least initially, by media, academics and some politicians with surprise. Whilst the referendum had been expected to be close (Johnston et al., 2016), the Remain campaign appeared to have a slim majority on the eve of the polls. Nevertheless, on the morning of 24 June 2016 the outcome was clear, and the population of the UK had voted to leave the EU with a narrow majority. Similarly, Donald Trump's electoral college victory in the 2016 US Presidential Election was viewed as unexpected and hailed as evidence of a substantial shift in political and social outlooks. Over the coming weeks, the narrative turned towards explanations of disenfranchisement of a sizeable group who had not experienced the growth and wealth associated with globalisation, combined with a declaration that politics was entering a so-called 'post-truth' phase in which dialogue pivoted around emotions and perceptions disconnected with the content of policy and objective facts were refuted or ignored in key political debates. These explanations have sought to characterise the EU Referendum as well, developing an explanation that suggests the vote for Brexit belongs to an exceptional, unpredictable constituency of electors and provides evidence of new and emerging political forces on both sides of the Atlantic.

The 2017 UK General Election appears to have been a return to a much older politics with a two-party Conservative and Labour, outcome not seen mid 1970s (Johnston et al., 1988).¹ However, although portrayed as a 'return to history' the drivers are consistent with the 2016 shifts. Survey analysis released two weeks after the General Election highlighted a trend with class divides replaced by age, education and employment status as key determinants of voting preferences (YouGov, 2017). Few predicted the Brexit vote, the election of Trump, or the outcome of the UK's snap General Election, which saw the Conservative party losing rather than strengthening their parliamentary majority and, in each case, post-election commentaries have attributed the results (at least in part) to a 'ripping up' of traditional voting patterns.

¹ Across the UK, Conservatives and Labour shared 82.4 percent of the vote. Results in England were split between these two parties. In Northern Ireland, all but one of the seats went to the Democratic Unionist Party or Sinn Féin. By contrast, Scotland saw a return to multi-party politics with the resurgence of the Scottish Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats taking seats from the Scottish National Party. In Wales, the Labour Party continues to dominate.

This paper makes an alternative contention: the results are not the result of seismic shifts in electoral opinion. Rather they represent the latest expressions of *long-standing and deeply entrenched* inequalities of not only outcomes, but also opportunities for outcomes experienced by specific sections of the population since the late 1970s (Hacker, 2006; Ohlsson et al., 2009; Piketty, 2014). Much is being written about the income inequality, lack of opportunity and the alienation of entire groups of people underpinning the votes (including the extent to which this is related to the implementation of austerity post-2010 – see, for example, Fetzner, 2018). This paper goes further in explicitly connecting these electoral outcomes with long-term processes of social residualisation. In the US, the election result was the upshot of an intensification of economic anxieties and a growing gap between rich and poor that can be traced through multiple previous votes (see Johnston et al., 2017). We posit here that the processes underlying the UK Brexit majority were also visible beforehand and represent a continuum of outcomes that has been, at least partially, tangible for many years. What was different in the voting patterns of the EU referendum was the blurring of party lines, with both party members and voters occupying the leave and remain camps from across the political spectrum. The change in Labour under Jeremy Corbyn, coupled with a movement to the right by the Conservatives, has since enabled both parties to reclaim some of the votes lost to the fringes, paving the way for last year’s two-party General Election contest as voters were offered highly contrasting approaches to education, immigration and Brexit.² Rather than distinct instances of voter volatility these political outcomes are, then, moments when hitherto neglected schisms within society are brought to the surface in a manner which can no longer be ignored.

Given the apparent surprise of the electoral outcomes, we caution against seeing 2016–17 as a moment of political change. Rather, there are long-term and entrenched policy moves that have repeatedly sought to transform Western society by distancing the better-off working classes from those at the lower end of the social spectrum. For each move that has ‘skimmed’ the wealthiest working classes – in the UK, the right to buy as a means to remove social renters with the means to buy their own house – another has pushed a much larger group of those who are ‘left behind’ (Goodwin and Heath, 2016) into greater precarity – for instance, the benefit cap. Building on work that we have conducted together on the stretching and splintering of the group in the ‘large middle’ of the income distribution (MacLeavy and Manley, 2018), we call in this paper for an examination of the processes and mechanisms by which opportunities for social mobility are entrenched via

² The British Election Study found that despite its ambiguous stance on what sort of Brexit deal the party would pursue, Labour were viewed by voters in the General Election as the party of soft Brexit. The Conservatives were ‘the party of leave’ (BES, 2017).

the policy directions undertaken by successive governments. Presently, the stagnation or decline that specific sections of the population have experienced since the late-1970s risks being occluded by an explicit focus on culture and identity issues embroiled in the political alignments. Thus, we call for a renewed focus on the roots of the new political cleavages to better understand the ‘surprising’ electoral outcomes of the past two years.

The next section of the paper provides evidence of rising inequality across the West, and specifically how the fracturing away of the top and bottom 1% has left an elongated middle group itself experiencing substantial fracturing within (MacLeavy and Manley, 2018). Whereas group identity may once have been sufficient to explain an individual’s political behaviour (Butler and Stokes, 1969; 1974), recent work has shown that interactions between combinations of characteristics are important (Johnston et al., 2018). In addition to this, we argue that the local and specific experiences of people are important. Within the elongated middle there is a vast heterogeneity of experiences which, taken together with the multifaceted nature of identity, means that belonging to ‘the middle’ is no longer diagnostic of behaviour. The third section of the paper then examines the policy context that ought to be considered central to the process of socio-political fracturing that we observe currently in the UK. We provide an assessment of the impact of particular policies and reforms, then chart a course forwards.

2. Inequality and disenfranchisement

Since the late 1970s, income inequality within the UK, US and comparable advanced economies has grown substantially, with the Gini coefficient rising from 0.25 in 1979 to 0.34 in 2014 for the UK and from 0.34 to 0.41 for the same period in the US (World Bank, 2017; Resolution Foundation, 2017; Institute for Policy Studies, 2017). Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that inequality is being perpetuated and intensified by what are termed ‘intergenerational inheritances’ (Andrews and Leigh, 2009; Bowles and Gintis, 2002; Christophers, 2017; De Nardi, 2004; MacLeavy and Manley, 2018; Picketty, 2014). This term refers to the transmission of societal advantages and disadvantages from one generation to the next, not only through the hard transfer of money and assets (Hochstenbach, 2018), but also through the softer transfers in access to opportunities that prosperity enables, such as secure housing, access to well-resourced neighbourhoods or better schooling (van Ham et al., 2014; Christophers, 2017). These intergenerational inheritances mean that those from more affluent backgrounds have greater support to succeed, whilst those from less enabled and underprivileged backgrounds face ever greater challenges to improve their life course outcomes. Whilst the gap between the upper

echelons and lower strata of the middle has been growing (Social Mobility Commission, 2017a; 2017b; Belfield et al., 2017), state interventions to ameliorate the structural disadvantages that impede certain population groups from achieving upward social mobility are being scaled back (Savage, 2015; Mason, 2017).³ Disenchantment with the Conservative government's austerity measures – not only the pernicious universal credit regime which fails to address the economic reasons why individuals become reliant on the welfare state, but also the loss of funding for local authorities, smaller infrastructure and general cuts which cause further hardship – is therefore growing and leading to increased social tensions between groups in the large middle as evidenced by the growing resentments between native-born and foreign-born electorates of working-age observed in the run up to the EU referendum (Jarman, 2016).

Notably, the concerted political effort to limit social protections and privatise risk from the state onto individuals has been accompanied by a language of meritocracy. Leaders on both side of the Atlantic espouse the principle of 'equality of opportunity' and a renewed desire to encourage those with the expertise and abilities to climb the 'ladder of success' (see May, 2016; Trump, 2017). The extent to which social mobility is facilitated or restricted by the intergenerational transmission of inequality lies unacknowledged in these pronouncements. At the same time, we hear those reliant on various state supports condemned in a political discourse of morality that distinguishes between 'strivers' and 'skivers' (Valentine and Harris, 2014), part of a wider process of individualisation and responsibilisation (Kelly, 2001; MacLeavy, 2008; Cairns, 2013). Those who do not have access to inherited money, assets and family connections and who lack cultural capital are implored to work harder to 'catch up' with no recognition of the embedded structures of (dis)advantage or the fact that where you live, not just how you live, affects your future life prospects. It follows that if an individual succeeds it is because they deserve to. If an individual does not improve their outcomes or is reliant on the state for assistance – whether through employment, benefits or housing – then increasingly they are seen to be at fault. The emphasis on individual responsibility permeates many aspects of everyday life (Hall, 2017; 2018). It impinges on private and domestic spaces of the home as much the public spaces of offices, and neighbourhood and community buildings (Crossley, 2016). It also transcends temporal borders causing effects that shape individuals, families and communities not only now, but in the future (Pimlott-Wilson and Hall, 2017).

³ Although the apparent decline in social mobility is contested with Blanden et al. (2004) finding no evidence of a significant change in intergenerational class mobility post-1970, a recent critique by Bukodi et al. (2015) suggests that this is a product of the relative expansionist phase, which started in the 1970s as the demand for professional and service led jobs facilitated new forms of employment. In comparison, there is now a more contractionist structure in operation with evidence of reduced demand for salariat positions creating the conditions under which the experience of downward mobility will become more common.

In this context, the United Kingdom Independent Party (UKIP) has been able to exert a catalytic effect upon the large middle group. The rise of the UKIP vote provides clear evidence of a dissatisfaction with the mainstream and normal politics of the left and right, and the disabling policy developments of recent decades (Clarke et al., 2017). Given that UKIP drew voters from both the Conservatives and Labour Party over a number of years, there is evidence of trends towards greater inequality and insecurity affecting voting patterns within the middle group, even more so than the strata of unskilled manual workers and unemployed located at the bottom end of the income distribution, where the empirical evidence is mixed and inconsistent (Inglehart and Norris, 2016).⁴ Indeed, Frank (2007) details the impact of greater concentrations of income and wealth at the top of the economic pyramid inciting middle-income families to spend more on cars, houses and appliances in an effort to keep up with the conspicuous consumption of the ‘elite’. As those in the middle find themselves spending more than they earn and carrying record levels of debt whilst worrying – perhaps for the first time – about their employment security, they react at the polls to the erosion of their privileges and status (see Kelly and Enns (2010) and Newman et al (2014) on how inequality affects political engagement). We therefore see an interaction of economic with political/cultural factors. The trend toward inequality is the root cause of the Brexit vote, although the majority vote to leave cannot be explained as a purely economic phenomenon (Inglehart and Norris, 2016). Thus, in the 2017 election, there was a return to older politics post-Brexit. Younger educated voters, who perceived they had futures to protect from anticipated economic insecurity and the further contraction of state support headed to the Labour Party, which has shifted ideologically to the left under Corbyn, and older generations who perceived they had already lost out and so had moved from Labour to UKIP, or were doing relatively well and thus had an interest in protecting their present day privilege, supported the Conservative Party which has moved in the opposite direction away from the centre-ground (YouGov, 2017).

3. Policy as a driver of disenfranchisement

As analyses of the Brexit vote show us, the divisions between the working and middle classes are impenetrable in the context of a post-Fordist economy (Inglehart and Norris, 2016; Penn, 2016). If we seek definition on the basis of jobs, income or wealth, we risk eliding the variations in economic, social or cultural capital that exist and continue to configure opportunities for upwards social mobility within and across different groups. Likewise, class codifications based on self-

⁴ Similarly, the loss of the middle ground from Liberal Democrats – although attributed to Nick Clegg’s decision to join with the Conservatives in the 2010-15 Government – could be seen as a loss of confidence in the middle way.

identification do not sufficiently reflect an individual's economic position or prospects owing to geographical differences in the cost of living weighed against variations in the cultural, recreational and economic opportunities available in a given area. Those places where the greatest proportion of leave votes were cast (including Welsh Valleys, Sunderland, Doncaster and areas of the West Midlands) represent areas that have long been in economic decline (Social Mobility Commission, 2017b). They are places where those with the ability to leave largely have done so, while those who cannot leave have remained in place and are increasingly residualised (Dorling, 2010). However, research does not consistently confirm the claim that support for Brexit was due to area-based factors (Inglehart and Norris, 2016). Indeed, the strength of the leave vote lay outside the central areas of urban conurbations, with the Local Authorities returning the highest proportion in favour to leaving the EU found in the Midlands and rural Lincolnshire. Moreover, all regions outside of Greater London, Scotland and Northern Ireland voted for Britain to leave the EU (Electoral Commission, 2016). The fracturing and polarisation of the middle class and the extent to which the widening gap between rich and poor has been accelerated by the role of government policy interplayed with changes in the global financial structures has been underplayed within the narrative of Brexit. To understand the Brexit vote we need to look at the implications of individual and intersectional structures of inequality for upward social mobility and class.⁵

Whilst not denying the expressed attitudes on immigration, the colonial nostalgia, or the influential effect of the Leave campaign's claims about the weekly dividend of £350 million, the impetus for many of the 17 million Britons who voted for Brexit was the disparities of income, wealth and opportunity between social groups, regions and generations that have been worsening for some years (Social Mobility Commission, 2017b). The Brexit vote provided a conduit for disenfranchised voters, notably the 'left behind' working class whites (Goodwin and Heath, 2016; Bromley-Davenport et al., in press).⁶ Yet key to Leave campaign's success were the votes cast by the large proportion of the population in the middle of the distribution, who reported feeling malaise about changes in the economy resultant from the hollowing out of the white-collar professions (Antonucci et al., 2017; Swales, 2016). This neglected middle group includes those who have experienced real wage stagnation during a time when the government rhetoric is presenting a package of austerity and stripping back the provision through which individuals in the middle of

⁵ This is also true in other national contexts (see, for example, Carnes and Lupu, 2017, on the role of class in the election of Trump)

⁶ By contrast voters identifying with BME groups were much more likely to vote remain (IpsosMORI, 2018) despite having the lowest life chances of all groups (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2016) and so could be expected to be more likely to register their objection to the status quo.

the income distribution could once obtain welfare support (e.g. child benefit reforms). They are the people for whom the potential advantages of open travel with the EU have been outweighed by the perceived threat of migrants challenging their employment or housing (the cost of which has been increasing rapidly). They do not feel that they are connected with the 'liberal elites' of the government and trade and are increasingly frustrated with social systems that manipulate 'merit' to the benefit of the wealthy and well resourced (Freeman, 2018).

These developments are not (solely) the result of new policy interventions, but rather the latest expressions of a process of neoliberalisation that is reducing the potential, influence and cohesion of communities towards the middle and lower ends of the middle *in addition to* those at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Because neoliberalism does not seek to mitigate the different capacities of people to work and prosper, its ascent is linked to a growth of social and spatial inequality (Dorling, 2014). Those in the large middle are voting against the significant reductions in opportunity that have been in progress for many years, just as working class communities that have been successively hit by waves of globalisation, who are competing for employment with migrants from the A8 countries (or as was so often the case in the Brexit heartlands the most fearful of having to compete) and have not been provided with the means to access the benefits of the single European market and limitless travel (Bromley-Davenport et al., in press).

There is a need, then, to acknowledge the opportunities and restrictions placed on an individual which entrench social and cultural realms of disadvantage and in doing so deepen existing divisions between and within cities, states and regions. The unevenness of the 'spatial opportunity structure' (Galster and Sharkey, 2017) is considered to be one of the underlying mechanisms through which the places that individuals live within impacts their well-being, the so-called 'neighbourhood effects' (for an overview see van Ham et al., 2012), although this could be 'scaled up' to enable regional or cross-national comparisons. Within the structure are the facilities, culture and provisions not only of an individual's household, but also the facilities, services and composition of the street, collection of streets, 'neighbourhoods' or wider environment that individuals live within. These might include services such as libraries and parks, but also include schools, the local labour market and care provisions. In places where, for instance, libraries, schools and youth clubs can be protected and fought for and where the provision of social clubs is vibrant then the opportunity framework provides advantages and social skilling not available to those located outside its remit. More concerning perhaps, are the more local exclusions that have occurred when the framework is available in the local environment but access to it is either controlled or curtailed

preventing individuals from joining because of a lack of resource. For instance, when households become stretched the financial, social and care resources they can devote to their development become restricted (Boggess and Corcoran, 1999).

The complex interactions between individual life courses, overarching systems of privilege and opportunity and spatial/scalar effects are key to understanding the dynamic stratification processes in operation. This focus is important not only for debates about electoral outcomes and, as a corollary, social cohesion but also for grounded research into the implementation of particular policies or reforms where the issue of unequal outcomes continues to be a key concern. Certainly, the language of social mobility begins to take on a different meaning with the knowledge of different opportunity frameworks. The potential for meritocracy as a means to ensure that those who deserve to be at the pinnacle get there as a result of their achievements, also requires that those at the base deserve to be there as well. When social mobility is blended with meritocracy and a policy formation, within both the current Conservative governments but also within the previous Labour governments and across an extended backdrop of the 1980s and early 1990s Conservatism and privatisation, the promise of future prosperity rings hollow. Surviving and protecting access to the lives they currently have becomes a priority of voters, not seeking advancement. Ensuring that employment is maintained and ‘just managing’ is regarded as success. As the opportunity structures around individuals remain unacknowledged the turn to solutions as offered within the Brexit vote to ‘take back control’ appeals not because the (perceived) threat of the EU is eroding their life outcomes but because the assurance of taking back control is deemed to be essential to survival.

4. Conclusion

This paper has sought to alight interest in the long-term consequences of ‘causal pathways to inequality’ (Lamont et al., 2014). Research already points to the potential for years of life lost through austerity (Green, 2017). We suggest the need to adopt a longer time frame to fully understand the present and future impacts of a succession of disabling policy developments. This focus is especially important given the changes in the international configurations that are expected to result from Brexit look likely to make the life courses of individuals more precarious.⁷ Socially, those in the middle and lower strata of the income distribution are expected to find social mobility becomes increasingly restricted as further increases in inequality reduce the ability of parents with

⁷ Super (2017) aptly notes ‘the self-destructive qualities of the Brexit vote’

the fewest resources to support their children relative to those with the greatest resources (Resolution Foundation, 2017). Exacerbating the effects of inherited disadvantage, the places where vote to leave the EU was highest are likely to also be the places where the impacts of Brexit will be most acutely felt: the old industrial areas of England and Wales that have borne the brunt of economic restructuring as international multinationals increasingly plied their trades, but also where the greatest investments have been made by the European Union (Dhingra et al., 2017).

While there might appear to be a contradiction between what would appear logical in the light of the social mobility literature and the outcomes that individuals have expressed their preference for at the polls, an alternative reading might suggest that given the position those in the middle and lower strata have found themselves in a vote for Brexit is a logical response, in fact the only one that they could give. European integration hasn't worked so hang the consequences of EU withdrawal! The vote to leave could transcend traditional political and class allegiances because voters from different cohorts found in the EU referendum a common cause. It remains to be seen if the outcome of the Brexit process will deliver a common outcome for those who got behind it. However, regardless of the outcome, there are evidently long-term causes and effects of rising inequality that warrant further exploration.

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